

## A Discourse on the Reflections of Buddhist Political Thought

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### Abstract:

*Historically and philosophically, there are two paradigms that capture much of the course and development of Political thoughts. We can call these as western approaches i.e. European countries, United States of America etc. and Eastern approaches, i.e. China, Japan and India etc. The western approach has been appeared in literature of ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle etc. and developed the theory to be modern political science, which is studied still today. But the Eastern approach has been appeared in the religious scripture such as Confucianism of China, Taoism of Japan and Hinduism and Buddhism of India etc.*

*The political ideas of Buddhism reflect the theory of the cosmic evolution of Nature. This comprises the origin and growth of the State; the evolution of man and his institutions including the political institution of the ruler and his office based on a social contract. It approaches political questions mainly, though not exclusively, from the ethical viewpoint, clarifies the position of the ruler and the nature of kingship, expects him to live a blameless life entirely devoted to ceaseless administrative labour. He should concentrate his efforts not on leading people to warfare, but on the promotion of public good and welfare, both spiritual and material. Thus a heavy responsibility is laid on him; bliss in heaven or tortures of hell are held out to him in accordance with his success or failure in the great moral and political venture.*

**Keywords:** Buddha, Sangha, Republic, Democracy, Social Welfare, Tripitaka.

### Introduction:

Politics and religion are social ideals and are having similar objectives to build the society of human beings to be regular and peaceful society. The Buddhism concerns with politics by teaching because Buddha's teaching expresses to politics. The Buddha was the teacher or advisor of people of society in that time and furthermore, he instructed the people being a good subject of the country<sup>1</sup>. The Buddhist political thought is brought to study in the Tripitaka. It is used as the primary source for searching Buddha's political thought. Political thought in Tripitaka means the thought about the state and its whole component in the time of Buddha (623 BC - 543 BC).<sup>2</sup> In this paper I will discuss about Buddhist political ideal such as the nature of King, the origin of the state, administrative principles of righteousness and the Buddha's view on the nature of state. This paper also explores that how these Buddhist political ideas were developed and practiced in the early centuries of its origin.

### Politics and Religion:

There is an inherent problem of trying to intermingle religion with politics. The basic of religion is morality, purity and faith, while that for politics is power. In the course of history, religion has often been used to give legitimacy to those in power and their exercise of the power.<sup>3</sup> The thrust

of the Buddha Dhamma is not directed to the creation of new political institutions and establishing political arrangements. Basically, it seeks to approach the problems of society by reforming the individuals constituting that society and by suggesting some general principles through which the society can be guided towards greater humanism and improved welfare of society.

Although a good and just political system which guarantees basic human rights and contains checks and balances to the use of power is an important condition for a welfare society, people should not fritter away their time by endlessly searching for the ultimate political system where men can be completely free, because complete freedom cannot be found any system but only in minds which are free.<sup>4</sup> Freedom in the trust sense is only possible when a person uses Dhamma to develop his character through good speech and action and to train his mind so as to expand his mental potential and achieve his ultimate aim of enlightenment. He taught; 'The victor breeds hatred, the defeated lives in misery. He who renounces both victory and defeat is happy and peaceful.' Not only did the Buddha teach non-violence and peace, he was perhaps the first and only religious teacher who went to the battlefield personally to prevent the outbreak of a war.<sup>5</sup> He diffused tension between the sakyas and the Koliyas who were about to wage war over the water of Rohini.<sup>6</sup>

**Origin and nature of state:**

Of the two principal theories about the origin of the state namely, the theory of divine origin and the theory of social contract, the latter is maintained by the Buddhist political ideal as recognized by many scholars. There is in Buddhism, no divine disposition in the matter of the creation of state. Bani Prasad wrote 'On the other hand, reason and expediency alone determined the formation of the state. With its rational attitude to the state, Buddhism indicates neither the state nor the class system to have any arbitrary and ultimate sanction other than human expediency.' The first king holds office by virtue of contract with his subjects and this is probably one of the words oldest versions of the contractual theory of state.<sup>7</sup>

The concept of states might be well known in the sense of country or kingdom ever before the Buddha's appearance. On that time there were so many states in Ancient India like city states of Greeks, but the Buddha did not describe about state directly when consider to the elements of state. The Buddha did not speak elements of state directly but it can be comparable following to the elements of state as following:

1. Population as human being
2. Territory as the realm of rulers
3. Sovereignty as the norm and
4. Government as a supreme ruler in state.

The Buddha presented the happiness as the goal of life for human being as well as political thinker, who have presented the way to attain the highest happiness by :

1. Experience government without smiting, conquering and punishing but by Norms.<sup>8</sup>
2. Support the people to live following the principles of the noble eightfold path.<sup>9</sup>
3. Maintain the interest in present and future<sup>10</sup> and
4. Attain common happiness and the internal happiness as Nibbana.<sup>11</sup>

According to Buddhism, the state has evolved out of the natural process and reason. According to Aganna Sutta it indicated that the world had manifested, remained and passed away before this world's appearance. The primitive humans were living a special mode of life without any socio-political institutions. Their mode of life was perfect and there was a perfect society because human beings lived in accordance with virtue and morality. In such society, there was no concept of master, slave, ruler, ruled, social system or political institutions. Their feeling was full of good will

without the interface of any other passionate evil. Then some impurities i.e. craving, greed, desire, laziness, selfishness and conceit had arisen in their minds in chronological order. Their mode of life was changed from purity to impurity. The gender..... the family..... the private property..... the ruler became manifest and then the state in the chronological order.<sup>12</sup>

About the state government, the Buddha supported state exercising without smiting, conquering and punishing but by norms. He uphold the Norm (Dhamma : the law of truth and righteousness) as called. Dhammadhipateyya mean the norm being sovereignty. Dhammadhipateyya could not preserve itself besides human beings that accepted and upheld it as sovereignty. The Buddha demonstrated the means to preserve Dhammadhipateyya by :

1. Having a good leader or ruler
2. To present the people from evil
3. To distribute the resources to the poor and
4. To solve the trouble of the people

He speak of the norm (Dhamma : law truth and righteousness) as sovereignty and the means to preserve the norm.

**Origin and Nature of King:**

A kingdom without a king or a ruler cannot survive. Again a river without water, a woman without a husband, and kingdom without a king are called naked. The king is the great elect, the lord of lands, the source of pleasure to the people an steamer and promoter of a righteous order (dhamma) through which he sets a righteous ward and protects the people within his realm. About state rulers and citizens the Buddha had described the origin and growth of state rulers as :

1. King (Mahajana Sammata, Khattiya, Raja)
2. The group of king (Ganaraja)
3. The Emperor (Chakkavattiraja)

The Buddha had described the origin and growth of those state rulers and supported them by giving the Dhamma as virtue. He taught Dararajadhamma or tenfold virtue of duties of king for the king.<sup>13</sup> The Apararihanidhamma or the norm (Dhamma or law of righteousness) which never leads to declination but only to prosperity for the group of kings<sup>14</sup>, Cakkavativatta<sup>15</sup> or five duties of Emperor<sup>16</sup>. Otherwise the taught of virtue of Raja-sevaka who under the king or the group of kings as called Rajavasatidhamma<sup>17</sup> for citizen of state. Five percepts were presented by him for the people who are citizen of state.

The idea of Cakkavattiraja was the new idea which appeared in Tripitaka. The Buddha had

described that the emperorship had the endow with 32 characteristics as called 'Maha purisa Lakkhana', good qualifications such as he had to be well born on both sides, on mother's side and on the father side, of pure descent back through seven generations and so slur was cast upon him, and no approach in respect of birth etc. the seven treasurer as wheel, Elephant, Horse, Gem, Woman, Housefather and advisor and virtues as the five conditions of Cakkavattivatta completely, and virtue was the most important endowment.

### The Ten qualities of king:

It is obvious that the details given above should be amalgamated to sketch out a complete set of qualities of a king as enunciated by the Buddha. Since the viceroy had always been the eldest son of the king was the legitimate heir to throne. Then the whole set of qualities of a king according to the Buddhist point of view should be as follows: (1) Noble birth (2) Possession of wealth (3) Powerful army (4) Wise prime minister (5) Glory (6) Beauty (7) Parental affection (8) Love towards his country (9) Thorough training in kingly matters of skill and (10) Wisdom, intelligence and proficiency in judgment.

As observed earlier, the king is the head of the state and its people according to the Buddha. The statement 'a warrior king, anointed of head, if he has five qualities, in whatsoever quarter he abide, (as if he is) in his own conquered territory' itself bears evidence that the ruler is pre-eminent in the state machinery.

### Administrative Principle of Righteousness:

The ruler and his office came into existence as a means of solving the anarchic situation and of restoring the righteous order in society. Following the principle of righteousness the ruler should rule the country according to the wish of the public and set before himself as his first and last aim the faithful practice of the royal virtues in order to promote the universal welfare of all his subjects, of all creatures down to the dumb animals. This principle can be traced back to the following words of the Buddha; 'A righteous ruler is one who honours, reveres, esteems and relies only on righteousness (*Dhamma*). With righteousness as his standard, as his banner, as his power and sovereignty of governing, he righteously watches over and protects the people for their own sake; he does over and protects the people for their own sake; he does so with regard to the nobles and leaders of the army, the Brahmins and householders, town-and country folk the Brahmins and recluses, the beasts and birds alike.' When the king is careless in his rule, he leads the country to ruin, and due to his carelessness he becomes unworthy of his title as 'the leader of people' and the people, on their part, will also become careless, and therefore a ruler ought to be exceedingly careful and earnest. A righteous ruler shuns the

four wrong courses of judgment and decision either through favouritism, malice, delusion, or fear and constantly observes the royal virtues. Through the practice of these virtues and the four elements of popularity (*sa-gahavattu*), namely generosity, lovely speech, beneficent activities and impartiality, he wins over the public will and the people's hearts.

He always opens his eyes and ears to the people. Seeing, hearing and realizing, according to the truth, the condition of the people, he will be able to win his way to good and success in administrative affairs. Moreover, he should earnestly exercise ruler ship in a righteous way, even for his own reputations sake, by avoiding the company of those who have abandoned virtues, by rousing in his subjects the love of virtue and detachment from vice, by making them intent on activities of kindness and by leading them along the path that leads to happiness in life, by protecting them, by purifying his moral conduct, by performing charitable activities, and by directing his good-will towards all people, as if they were his own blood relations.

If a ruler fails to promote and protect the agricultural folk, his tax-payers, he gets into difficulties concerning such wealth as consists in natural sources. If he fails to promote and protect those engaged in commerce, trade and even marketing, who also pay him customs and taxes, he raises difficulties with respect to the national income. The ruler who, having no reason to complain of his officials, fails to honour them and show regard to them cannot enjoy success in his administrative work. If he stains his behaviour by disregarding the religious men, he will be destitute of heavenly existence. As one who plucks an unripened fruit and thus spoils the seed without finding juice, so a ruler, who raises unlawful tributes, ruins his country without obtaining profit from them, in the same manner a country well-protected and well-promoted by its good ruler grows in moral advancement, material progress, happiness and salvation of the people.

### The Sangha Governance:

During the time of the Buddha, political groups and trade guilds were called 'Sangha'<sup>18</sup>. The term was also applied to religious orders and thus the Buddhist order was called a Sangha. Buddhist Sangha society was established by the Buddha and has the aim to attain salvation. Buddhist Sangha community was not theocratic. The origin and growth of Buddhist Sangha society in Buddha's life time began with the preaching of the first sermon called *Dhammacakkapavattana sutta*.<sup>19</sup>

The evaluations of Buddha's forms of Sangha governance can classify as:

1. Monarchy : The power of decision-making is vested in the hands of Buddha and is

transferred to seniors Bhikkus like the king and his subjects who work under his business and

2. Democracy : The power of decision making was vested in the hands of all Bhikkus as sangha. For the form of government the Buddha adopted the republican ways practiced in the communities with which he had very close relations. When the Buddha had passed away, the power of decision making was vested in the hands of Sangha. There were the characteristics of democracy. When we consider in detail, Buddha sangha governance was similar with democratic system as follows :

1. Government of Bhikkus, by Bhikkus, for Bhikkus.
2. All Bhikkus were equal under the law-Dhamma and Vinaya.
3. All Bhikkus can participate to comment and advice to the sangha.
4. Decision-making by all Bhikkus.

Thus, most of political thinkers adopted Buddha's thought as democracy. But, his some practices on his Sangha governance was socialism or communism, because his action was follows the society.<sup>20</sup> His teaching was change to be suitable for each society. The Buddhist sangha was the classless society. The Buddhist sangha was a unique form of society in which there was no class or social stratification. It was a society which supported the principles of classless society, fraternity, liberty and equality. Everybody in the Buddhist sangha society was equal under the same law.<sup>21</sup>

It could not be said that Buddha's thought on Sangha governance was democratic or communist, liberalist or socialist but Buddhist Sangha society was established by the Buddha around 2500 years ago; he emphasized quality of the persons who left home to be homelessness. They had to have the high moral standard of mind and could adopt Buddha's teaching and follow it. They could get self-control along with his discipline.

The main features of the Buddhist Sangha society could be concluded as follows :

1. It was governed by law - Dhamma and Vinaya.
2. All Bhikkus had the high standard of moral conduct and equal under the law- Dhamma and Vinaya.
3. Power of governance was in the assembly of Bhikkus.
4. It had on central government; all Bhikkus could form the assembly following the Vinaya.
5. Decision making must be done by all Bhikkus, not only majority.

6. It was the classless society, no caste, no class nor social status.

Thus, if one instance is adequate to come to a conclusion, as the modern scholars had done by quoting the Mahaparinirban Sutta to establish the Buddha's republican attitude, the above reference in the Samyukta Nikaya stands with equal strength for the fact that the Buddha never commended or favoured the republican federations over monarchical states of his days.

### **Buddha's Association with Contemporary Kings:**

Although the relationship between the Buddha and the kings during his time has already been discussed and examined in detail by various scholars, a brief survey would be attempted here to show the close and cordial connection the Buddha had with the contemporary kings. King Pasenadi of Kosala seems to have had a deep loyalty and intimate fondness towards the Buddha. He appears to have visited the Buddha regularly. As the very first Sutta of the Sanyutta Nikaya reveals, king Pasenadi of Kosala became a follower of the Buddha before long. He used to inform the Buddha of his personal conceptions and feelings. The Buddha was so close to him that king Pasenadi of Kosala once revealed a private discussion he had with his queen, Mallika, to the Buddha. The monks once informed the Buddha of a sacrifice arranged to be held on behalf of the king. Again the Buddha was told that he had seized many people as prisoners and bound them with ropes, chains and other ways. On these two occasions, even though the Buddha did not approve, he did not categorically denounce the king's actions. As the Sanyutta Nikaya observes, the Buddha once showed a critical attitude towards king Pasenadi of Kosala by saying; Hard is it, Sire, for you who are a layman, holding worldly possessions, dwelling amidst the encumbrances of children, accustomed to Benares sandalwood, arrayed in garlands and perfumes, using gold and silver, to know whether those are Arahats or are in the path of Arahatsip.

Then the Buddha goes on to teach the king how to recognize the moral character, pure-mindedness, fortitude and wisdom of a person. The king does not seem to have been hurt of this critical approach of the Buddha because he praises the Buddha on this occasion in the following terms: "It is wonderful, Lord; it is marvellous how exactly the Exalted One has spoken as to a layman's difficulties in learning to know anyone well and truly." King Pasenadi of Kosala has gone to the Buddha on another occasion with his regional kings to consult the Buddha over a controversial matter. When the kings were unable to convince each other king Pasenadi of Kosala says: "Let us go, Dear Sirs, and visit the Exalted One, and refer the matter of our inquiry to him. And let us accept his decision, whatever that may be". Once the king had dined off a large quantity of curried rice and went



to the Buddha. The Buddha could convince him to have light meals thereafter. When the king was not pleased after hearing that queen Mallika had given birth to a daughter, the Buddha made him comfortable by saying that sometimes females do better. Even when king Pasenadi of Kosala was engaged in state affairs in other parts of the kingdom away from the capital, he would visit the Buddha and engage him in conversation if the Buddha was anywhere in the neighbourhood. Two such conversations are recorded in the Dhammacetiya sutta and Kaoakathala sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya.

These instances, though they are of a personal nature, bring forward the Buddha's predilection towards the system to which king Pasenadi of Kosala belonged. The Buddha was never so close to the rulers of the republican federations. As stated before, the Buddha had no problem with any system. To him, there were two categories of kings, evil and good. He condemned the evil kings and praised the good kings irrespective of their power and influence. When Ajatasattu, king of Magadha, invaded Kasi against king Pasenadi of Kosala, the latter got defeated and retreated to his own capital, Savatthi. When the Buddha was informed of this he declared: "The king of Magadha, Ajatasattu, son of Accomplished Princess, is a friend to, an intimate of, mixed up with, whatever is evil. The king, the Kosalan Pasendi, is a friend to, an intimate of, mixed up with, whatever is good. These two kings met again in battle. King Pasenadi of Kosala won this time and captured alive. Later on Pasendi released Ajatasattu but confiscated his entire army, elephants, horses, chariots and infantry. The Samyutta Nikaya records the stanzas that the Buddha uttered hearing this information. On this occasion too, the Buddha was in sympathy with king Pasenadi of Kosala because the Buddha favoured the good kings over the evil ones. It should be remembered here that Pasenadi and Ajatasattu were on good terms after the second battle recorded in the Samyutta Nikaya. Ajatasattu was Pasenadi's nephew. To Pasenadi, Ajatasattu once sent a piece of foreign cloth which was equal to twenty four feet in length and twelve feet in breadth. Later Pasendi donated this to Elder Ananda, the chief attendant of the Buddha. The Buddha's association with Bimbisara, the king of Magadha, started before that with king Pasenadi of Kosala. According to the Pabbajja sutta of the Suttanipata, when he was a wandering ascetic just after his renunciation he met Bimbisara for the first time. As promised at this meeting, the Buddha visited Bimbisara immediately after he attained Buddha hood. Since then, the Buddha and Bimbisara had been dear and affectionate friends. At the request of Bimbisara, the Buddha established the custom of the monks assembling on the first, eighth, fourteenth and fifteenth days of each month.

During his life time, Bimbisara was considered the happiest of men, but the Buddha declared that he himself was happier than the king. In fact, it is strange that the Pali canon does not provide us with enough information regarding Bimbisara's visits to the Buddha or any particular sermon addressed by the Buddha to Bimbisara as in the case of king Pasenadi of Kosala. The Buddha once refers to Bimbisara when he addressed Pasenadi who along with five hundred horsemen, was on his way to combat Angulimala, the robber. Seeing the crowd, the Buddha asked Pasenadi whether King Seniya Bimbisara of Magadha was angry with him. After Bimbisara, his son, Ajatasattu became the heir of the kingdom of Magadha. Being a patricide, Ajatasattu faced the problem of having a close intimacy with the Buddha at the early stage of his career. His first visit to the Buddha is recorded in the Samaaphala sutta of the Digha Nikaya with due alarm. The sutta observes: "The king had five hundred of his women mounted on the she-elephants, one on each; and himself mounted the state elephant; and he went forth, the attendants bearing torches, in royal pomp, from Rajagaha to Jeevaka the physician's Mango Grove. And the king, when close upon the Mango Grove, was seized with a sudden fear and consternation, and the hairs on his body stood erect. Anxious and excited, he said to Jeevaka; you are playing me no tricks, Jeevaka? You are not deceiving me? You are not betraying me to my foes? How can it be that there should be no sound at all, not a sneeze nor a cough, in so large an assembly of the monks, among twelve hundred and fifty of the monks"? Then the king went in and bowed his head to the Buddha stretching forth his joined palms in salutation to the Order and asked his question on the immediate result of the life of a recluse. At the end of the sermon, when Ajatasattu departed, the Buddha declares: "The king, Monks, was deeply affected, he was touched in heart. If, Monks, the king had not put his father to death, that righteous man, righteous king, then would the clear and spotless eye for the truth have arisen in him, even as he sat there".

This shows that the Buddha did not have any grudge whatsoever against Ajatasattu. He was reckoned by the Buddha as the king of Magadha. The Buddha has realized the rising power of Magadha which culminated in the time of Asoka just after two centuries after his demise. Ajatasattu too was so full of love and respect for the Buddha that when he heard of Upaka Mandikaputta having spoken rather impolitely to the Buddha, he at once flew into rage.

### Conclusion:

In this paper, I have discussed the Buddha's political ideal which is described primarily in early Buddhist texts, with regard to politics, I have mentioned such as the origin and nature of state, the rulers of state, governance of

state, administrative principles of righteousness as well as the Buddha's view on the republican state of his time. Buddhism aims at creating a society where the ruinous struggle for power is renounced; where calm and peace prevail away from conquest and defeat; where the persecution of the innocent is vehemently denounced, where one who conquers oneself is more respected than those who conquer millions by military and economic warfare, where hatred is conquered by kindness, and evil by goodness, where compassion is the driving force of action, where life in peace and harmony, in a world of material contentment, is directed towards the highest and noblest aim, the realization of the

ultimate truth Nirvana. The Buddha says in Dhammapada Never by hatred is hatred appeared, but it is appeared by kindness, this is an eternal truth. One should win anger through kindness, wickedness through goodness and falsehood through truthfulness.

Moreover, it is necessary to make the point that as the Upali Sutta tells us that present the Buddha preached a liberal attitude to other religions also. Thereby he tried to uproot the cause of wars among the followers of religions, and in turn established peace and no war principle in the world of religions.

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